

POP-UP PROFILE

Wild about math? Count on it!

A numbers whiz fires up students

By William Hageman
Tribune staff reporter

Keeping the attention of a room of 4th graders is difficult. And keeping them interested while you're teaching them math is nearly impossible.

But there was Mike Byster, mesmerizing—really, they were spellbound—about 70 students and teachers at Westcott School in Northbrook.

By morning, Byster is a commodities trader. Afternoons are spent giving free demonstrations of what he calls "Methodical Thinking" at grade schools and high schools throughout the Chicago area. He does 150 to 200 shows a year, teaching kids various math and mental tricks.

He spends the first 10 minutes of each program strutting his stuff: multiplying large numbers, dividing larger numbers, adding 25 consecutive numbers (everything from 435 to 460, on this occasion)—and he gives the answers instantly.

That got the kids' attention.

And when he started showing the tricks of how he did it, and how they can do it, too, they were hooked.

After only five minutes at Westcott, he had the students squaring three-digit numbers almost instantly. Then there's the trick where kids can figure out the last three digits on a parent's driver's license. ("Try that at dinner tonight. And when they want to know how you did it, make them pay you.")

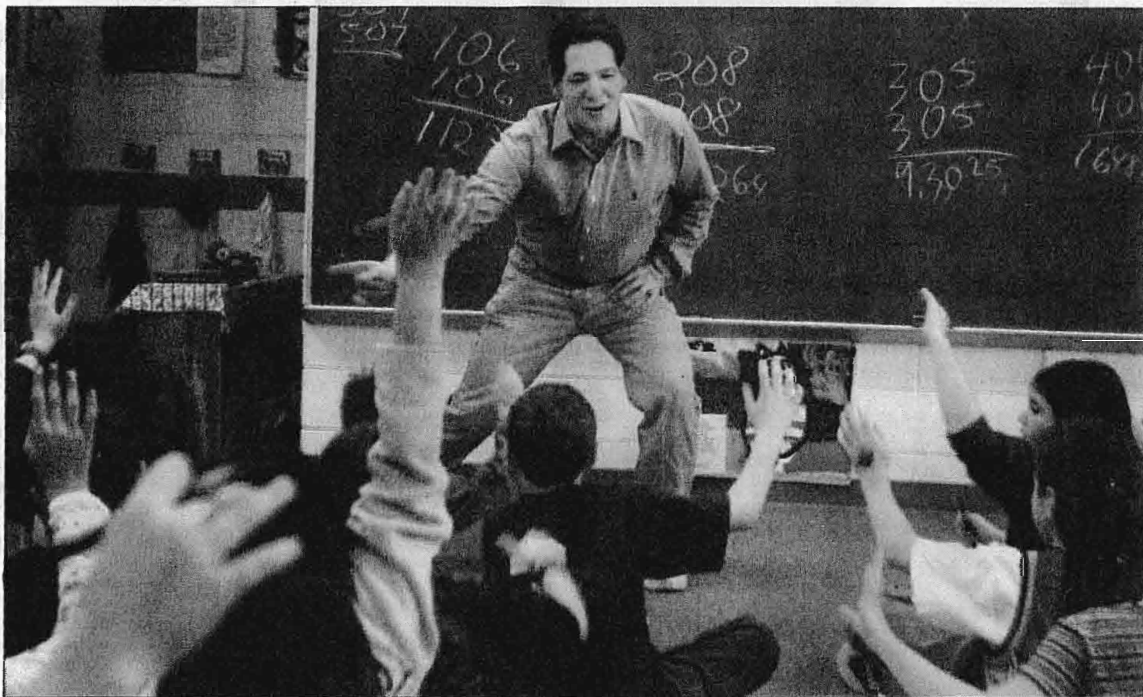
"Everybody thinks I do just numbers, but I work with words too," said Byster, 45, who lives in Skokie. All these games I invented as a kid, now I'm teaching them."

Q Quick, what's 414 times 72?

A [Instantly] 29,808.

Q Are kids getting enough math today?

A When we were kids, we knew our multiplication tables in the 1st or 2nd grade. Now they don't teach it till the 3rd



Math whiz/commodities trader Mike Byster of Skokie engages 4th-grade students at Westcott Elementary school in Northbrook.

Photo for the Tribune by Jerry Tomaselli

grade. Now there's so much structure instead of having fun. We used to have the Magic Square—remember? It was like tic-tac-toe... nine numbers, in three rows, and all the rows of numbers, up, down, across, added up to 15. The kids today don't know what that is.

Q How busy does this keep you?

A I've got 500 schools on my waiting list.

Q You don't charge anything. But you could make a lot of money from this.

A I've had a dozen offers, seven-figure offers, to put this on a video. But I turned them all down. How could I go into an inner-city school... "See what I can do? Now give me \$75 for a tape." We're working on a cartoon that will go into schools, maybe this fall.

Q If you didn't do this for a month, would you get rus-

ty?

A If I didn't do this for a month, I'd kill myself. This keeps me sharp.

Q What else do you do to stay sharp?

A There's like a half-dozen of my friends, my wife, a bunch of other people. I tell them if they're bored during the day, they should type in a message to me on my pager. But instead of a letter, they'll type, say, a 5. That could be a J, K or L on the telephone keypad. And I get the number they send and I have to figure out [their message].

So I'll be in the pit trading or doing a show, and I'll also be trying to figure out their message.

Q But what's the bottom line on this? What's the attraction?

A There's no ulterior motive. I'm doing this for fun. I get letters from China, Japan, Germany, asking me to do shows. I have no idea how they hear

about me.

I want to do this without charging, because then it wouldn't be fun.

Q 37 times 51.

A [Instantly] 1,887. But division is more cool because it carries out to more places; 823 divided by 57 is 14.438596. That's the kind of thing that freaks out parents, when kids carry out a problem to 8, 10 places.

Q Were you a math prodigy as a kid?

A I was no good at math at all. I never got A's or B's. Sometimes C's or D's. A lot of F's. I'm not a genius. Nowhere near it.

Q How long do schools have to wait for you to come out?

A I book only two weeks in advance. I'll book 10 schools for two weeks, but I usually end up doing 13 or 14. So if I get an e-mail from a teacher with an in-

teresting story or from an interesting school, I can move them right to the top of the list.

Q Why aren't you in Vegas?

A A long time ago, I was on a television program with Jay Levine. I do a trick, you take a card out of a deck of cards, and I'll go through it and tell you which card is missing. Within 24, 48 hours, I got letters from a half-dozen casinos—"If you're ever seen in our casino, you'll be asked to leave." I don't know how they found me. If I went to Vegas, I know I could do extremely well. But that's too much like work.

Q When you do your taxes—

A I send them out.

Mike Byster is always looking for schools to visit. For more information, contact him at mikebyster@cs.com.